

Chapter 1

Introduction and Purpose

Mission Statement

The mission of the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project is to implement a blueprint for conserving Nebraska's flora, fauna and natural habitats through the proactive, voluntary conservation actions of partners, communities and individuals.

To facilitate the development and implementation of a state wildlife action plan for Nebraska, the following guiding principles were developed by the Partnership Team.

Guiding Principles

Through the process of development, the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project shall...

- ❖ ... be open, transparent and inclusive.
- ❖ ... be built on a foundation of sound economic and scientific principles.
- ❖ ... keep the public informed and involved.

The blueprint produced by the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project shall...

- ❖ ...recognize private landowner participation is critical to the project's success.
- ❖ ...recognize and respect property rights and address property issues.
- ❖ ...have opportunities for conservation actions and partnerships across the state.
- ❖ ...ensure all participating are respected and treated fairly.
- ❖ ...encourage involvement through consistent and thorough information exchange.
- ❖ ...provide opportunities for developing conservation partnerships regardless of ownership.

Conservation actions as a result of the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project shall...

- ❖ ... be voluntary and incentive based.
- ❖ ... minimize the use of land acquisition as the primary tool for habitat conservation and instead principally use actions directed toward conservation on private lands.

Purpose and Need

Nebraska's rich biological diversity is composed of thousands of plant and animal species interacting with each other and the environment. The flora and fauna of the state, along with the natural habitats they occupy, form Nebraska's natural heritage – a legacy that should be treasured just as much as our cultural heritage. Unfortunately, populations of many once common species have declined because of a variety of stresses, including habitat loss, habitat degradation, diseases, and competition and predation from invasive species. While conservation actions in the past have had notable successes, they have not been sufficient to stem the overall tide of species decline. There is a need for a comprehensive, systematic and proactive approach to conserving the full array of Nebraska's biological diversity.

The goals of the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project are to:

1. Reverse the decline of at-risk species (and avoid the need for state or federal listing as threatened or endangered)
2. Recover currently listed species and allow for their de-listing
3. Keep common species common
4. Conserve natural communities

Almost all existing natural habitat in Nebraska, and the biological diversity it supports, resides on lands under private ownership. All Nebraskans can benefit from the strong conservation tradition and sound stewardship of private landowners. The Nebraska Natural Legacy Project seeks to continue this tradition, while at the same time creating new opportunities for collaboration between farmers, ranchers, communities, private and governmental organizations and others for conserving Nebraska's biological diversity, our natural heritage. The Nebraska Natural Legacy Project is non-regulatory, voluntary, incentive-based conservation. As stewards for the next generation, it is everyone's responsibility to ensure the treasures that were handed to us by nature and our predecessors are still here for future generations of Nebraskans to enjoy.

Conservation Funding

For more than fifty years, state fish and wildlife agencies have benefited from funds provided by the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson) and the Federal Aid in Sport Fisheries Restoration Act (Dingell-Johnson, Wallop-Breaux). These monies are collected through a federal excise tax on hunting and fishing equipment. In conjunction with revenues collected through the sale of hunting and fishing licenses and habitat stamps, these funds have provided consistent support for the conservation and management of game fish and wildlife species. These monies have been critical to the establishment of the Game and Parks Commission's long-term conservation planning and have led to significant results in Nebraska. Species such as white-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, elk, Canada geese, turkey and walleye, which were in low numbers or extirpated from the state in the early 1900s, have shown dramatic rebounds.

In Nebraska, game species make up about 1% of the estimated 30,000 species in the state. While many of the state's nongame species have received substantial benefits from habitat conservation and restoration directed at game species, their needs have not been fully met. Conservation efforts for these species have in large part been opportunistic and crisis-driven, limited by a lack of funding and by a lack of strategic approaches to species and habitat conservation. Today, with more than 1,300 species in the U.S. listed on the Federal Endangered and Threatened species list, and many more species in decline, the need has never been greater for a complimentary source of funding to support the conservation, protection, and restoration of the full array of species, especially those not covered under traditional funding strategies. The Nebraska Natural Legacy Project takes measures that aid in the recovery of declining species and ensure that common native species remain common.

A coalition including more than 6,000 organizations representing wildlife enthusiasts such as birdwatchers, hunters, anglers, and others was organized in the mid 1990's and is one of the largest grassroots coalitions of its kind in the nation's history. This coalition, known as Teaming with Wildlife, was created in part to demonstrate support for federal wildlife conservation funding that can be used to address the needs of declining fish and wildlife. In response to the Teaming with Wildlife Coalition, Congress established the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration program and the State Wildlife Grants Programs in 2001.

As a requirement for receiving funding through these two new programs, Congress required each state to develop a State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). Nebraska's plan is called the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project. The SWAP developed in Nebraska and in every other state provide an essential foundation for the future of wildlife conservation and a stimulus to engage the states, federal agencies, and other conservation partners to strategically think about their individual and coordinated roles in prioritizing and delivering conservation work. The Natural Legacy Project is designed as a blueprint for conservation that all organizations can use in Nebraska, not simply a plan for the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Eight Required Elements of the State Wildlife Action Plan

Congress identified eight required elements to be addressed in each state's wildlife action plan. Congress also directed that the strategies must identify and be focused on the "species of greatest conservation need," yet address the "full array of wildlife" and wildlife-related issues. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies have developed additional guidance on information needed to meet the eight elements (see Appendix 2). The strategies must provide and make use of these eight elements:

(1) Information on the distribution and abundance of species of wildlife, including low and declining populations, as the state fish and wildlife agency deems appropriate, that are indicative of the diversity and health of the state's wildlife; and,

(2) Descriptions of locations and relative condition of key habitats and community types essential to conservation of species identified in (1); and,

(3) Descriptions of problems which may adversely affect species identified in (1) or their habitats, and priority research and survey efforts needed to identify factors which may assist in restoration and improved conservation of these species and habitats; and,

(4) Descriptions of conservation actions proposed to conserve the identified species and habitats and priorities for implementing such actions; and,

(5) Proposed plans for monitoring species identified in (1) and their habitats, for monitoring the effectiveness of the conservation actions proposed in (4), and for adapting these conservation actions to respond appropriately to new information or changing conditions; and,

(6) Descriptions of procedures to review the strategy at intervals not to exceed 10 years; and,

(7) Plans for coordinating the development, implementation, review, and revision of the plan with federal, state, and local agencies and Indian tribes that manage significant land and water areas within the state or administer programs that significantly affect the conservation of identified species and habitats.

(8) Congress also affirmed through this legislation that broad public participation is an essential element of developing and implementing these plans.

To address both “species of greatest conservation need,” and the “full array of wildlife,” the Natural Legacy Project used a two-pronged approach – focusing on habitats and selected individual species. The Project has identified as a priority the conservation of multiple examples of each of the natural communities (habitat types) in the state. This approach conserves the vast majority of species – keeping common species common. For those species missed by this approach, typically the rare and imperiled species, attention was focused on individual at-risk species. To identify locations of key habitats, information on known locations of natural communities and at-risk species was used to identify a series of Biologically Unique Landscapes (BULs). These landscapes offer some of the best opportunities to conserve the full array of biological diversity (see Chapter 3 for explanation of methods used), though conservation in the state is not be limited solely to these landscapes. In addition to identifying problems or stresses affecting species and their habitats, we also identified a number of barriers that are impeding effective conservation. We have identified a set of overarching conservation strategies and actions to address the stresses and barriers that can be applied anywhere in the state (Chapter 4), as well as site-specific actions for each of the Biologically Unique Landscapes (Chapters 5-8).

Value of a State Wildlife Action Plan to Nebraska

The nationwide completion of State Wildlife Action Plans was viewed as a watershed event in the history of conservation in the United States. Conservation has traditionally taken a species-by-species approach and focused on a limited number of species. Previous conservation efforts aimed at non-game species have often focused on those species that were on the brink of extinction; however, these “emergency room” efforts at recovery are expensive and not always successful. A new proactive approach was needed that addressed the full array of wildlife - keeping common species common, while also preventing our at-risk species from declining to the point of threatened or endangered status.

State Wildlife Grant (SWG) funding has been instrumental in helping the state undertake this comprehensive planning process, the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project and implementing the plan. The development process itself has engaged new partners, strengthened existing partnerships, and significantly raised awareness about the state’s biological diversity. The resulting blueprint is designed to provide guidance and strategic focus to agencies, organizations, communities and individuals interested in implementing conservation.

The Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program and State Wildlife Grants Programs have provided new funding opportunities for conservation organizations in Nebraska. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has made a large share of these funds available to dozens of conservation organizations and universities through a competitive grants program (see Appendix 3). Projects currently underway and already completed have increased our knowledge about the species and habitats found in Nebraska and contributed towards their conservation. Continuation of a competitive grants program will be beneficial to implementation of the Natural Legacy Project.

State Wildlife Grant funding is a turning point in wildlife conservation funding, but it cannot possibly meet all the needs of Nebraska’s wildlife species. The actions outlined in this document suggest ways to use existing monetary resources efficiently, but new funding sources and new partnerships must also be explored. The responsibility for implementation of this plan rests with *all* Nebraskans.

One of the greatest strengths of the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project has been the diverse collaboration that has resulted from this planning process. Representatives from a variety of stakeholders assist with development of operational plans that are critical to implementation of the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project.